

# Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

## EMPTY JARS AND EMPTY JUGS

1 Kings 17:8-16

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Ron Starenko

8Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, 9“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” 10So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” 11As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” 12But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” 13Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that Lord sends rain on the earth.” 15She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

*Introduction: When I began working with this text, I recalled*

*John Steinbeck's novel, The Grapes of Wrath, the story of hardship and oppression, destitution and starvation migrant workers experienced in the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma during the Great Depression. As the novel ends, when a massive flood strands the members of the Joad family, they seek shelter in a barn, where they find a starving man and his son. The heroine of the story, Rose of Sharon, herself barely recovering from surgery, breastfeeds a dying man, nursing him back to health, overtones of the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday.*

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## **Diagnosis: The Jar that Stands Empty (v. 14)**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Running on Low**

On a regular basis, there are at least two indicators that give us a jerk, maybe even a moment of panic, when the gas gage in our car blinks empty or when our printer signals low on ink. Also, we know that we are running low when our bank account shows zero balance, when the doctor informs us that our sugar is low or blood pressure is high. Suddenly we are now alert. Again, when our pantry items get low unawares, we startle, like the widow in the lesson. Clearly, this Old Testament story reminds us of the scarcity we know when we lack rain or food, certainly in remote places far beyond our experience, as in Africa and India. In both the Old and New Testament lessons, widows, disadvantaged to begin with, suffer from lack, whether it's no money, no rain, or no food. We, too, can come up with a list of what we perceive as a lack or a shortage—losing out on luck, love, energy, opportunity, advantages, where we are ever and always being pushed closer to running on empty.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Desperate**

The widow knows the story, having enough food for one meal. And here comes audacious prophet Elijah, ordering the woman, “bring

me a morsel of bread" (v. 11). Crushed, she tells him, "I have nothing baked, and just enough meal and oil for a meal for myself and my son. After that, death" (v. 12). She is hitting the wall, at the end of her rope. Who hasn't, or won't at some future time or another, come to that place, emotionally or physically, when we believed that there is no hope, no chance, no possibility for us to get through a crisis? Beaten down, pushed to the edge, like the woman, we can reach a point where death by starvation, or any other means, is the only answer. Such on-the-brink despair is far more common than we might think, when hope runs out and we are overrun with a desperate sense of finality.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Hitting Bottom***

In that moment we might actually believe that dying is better than living. Having jettisoned everything, including hope, we face the ultimate crisis, how God stands in our way, for whom the prophet speaks, saying, "There will be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (v. 17), that is, "until I say so." There's no way to soften these words, wiggle our way around them, and escape the reality of God's judgment, that death follows drought, whether we say so or not. If indeed it is true that sinners come up empty before God, whether we are rich or poor, good or bad, high or low, our jar is empty and there is hell to pay. If so, then the novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, has a theological message, yet another reminder that the pot is empty and the human race has hit bottom, since the beginning. Where there is drought—no rain, no food—there is death. Left to ourselves, we have no answer to that.

## **Prognosis: The Jug that Keeps Giving (v. 14)**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Turning a Shortage Into a Surplus***

Remarkably, mercifully, according to the story, a shortage turns

into a surplus, as “the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” In the lesson the widow and her son get a reprieve, surviving “for many days” (v. 15). The widow in the gospel lesson survives, too, somehow. Both of these widows manage miraculously on very little. And who was more empty (Phil. 2:5-8) and became more poor (2 Cor. 8:9), more a widow, than our Lord Jesus Christ, who became the meal of God’s mercy and the oil of God’s grace, that we might live and not die? Jesus was emptied of his life, hitting bottom, suffering away our lack, then giving us his surplus, wrath giving way to forgiveness, preparing for us a meal, his living body, “that we may eat it, and [not] die” (v. 12). To change the metaphor, the jug, the jar keeps on giving, as the widow and her son continue to live “for many days” (v. 15), so the Jesus-Meal we share never empties, never fails (v. 16), the ever-giving, ever-forgiving God, as our “cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5) in mercy.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Abounding in Trust and Hope***

And, who, other than the nameless widow, abounds in trust and hope? Nothing had been going her way. Being a widow is trouble enough. Losing a son, then dying of hunger, is too much to take. Yet, she hung in there when the drought continued, when the nation suffered because of king Ahab’s arrogance, yes, even when she believed that she was a sinner, desiring trouble. Here is a Phoenician woman of another religion, crying out in faith, receiving the word of the prophet as a word from God. Here is a woman of faith and trust, a widow about to die, denying herself and her son, fighting for life with a death-defying hope.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Baking a Cake***

Amazingly, the widowed woman does more than suffer under the load she carries, her loss, her sins, her burden, when all seemed lost. She goes to her skimpy pantry and fetches what was

left in a jar of meal and a jug of oil, and bakes a cake, what she believes will be her final act, and serves it—and kept serving it, as the three of them “ate for many days” (v. 15)! There was plenty to go around for a long while. Indeed, the jar of meal and the jug of oil are signs of God’s goodness and mercy, the widow’s meal, also the widow’s mite, most certainly the Jesus-Meal, where giving and receiving never ends, yes, extends from the Lord’s Table and our own dining tables outward to a hungry, dying world, as we reach out to nurture life and give hope.